

Sermon – February 11, 2024
“Listen to him!”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Mark 9:2-9

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and renew our desire to be laborers in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! On the Christian calendar, today is Transfiguration Sunday. For most of us, the mountain top with Jesus is a place we have been before. We have climbed the mountain with Jesus before. We have witnessed his transformation. We have heard the voice of God speak before, saying, “This is my beloved, listen to him.”¹ The path into Lent lies before us. We have walked this path before, but we have never walked it this time. We are yet alive, and once again, we are blessed to go up the mountain with Jesus. We get to witness once again his glory on the mountain. We get another opportunity to glimpse Jesus’ glory and carry that glimpse down the mountain into the suffering of the cross, so that we might be sustained, enabled, and prepared to be those who are willing to suffer with Christ ourselves. We have walked this path before, but we have never walked it this time. What will we discover this time that we did not know before? What will God speak to us that we have never heard before? What will God remind us of that we have forgotten from our previous mountain top visits? What will God ask of us that we have never heard Him ask before? How will we obey Jesus as we have

never before obeyed him? As I thought about what it might be like to be with Jesus at the start of this morning, I could not help but think that if Jesus came to me and woke me up very early and said, “Come and go with me up this really high mountain,” that I might have told him, “Jesus I am so tired and I have that crowd to deal with today. Could you take someone else?” I wonder if I am willing to let Jesus interrupt my plans and to climb up this high mountain or even other small hills with him, to set aside all I have planned and to go with Jesus where he leads. We have walked this path before, but we have never walked it this time. Let’s walk the path up transfiguration mountain again with Jesus. Let’s look around to see what we have missed all of those other times. Come, Holy Spirit, and open our eyes so that we might see this time what we have never seen before.

We might need a little context for this morning’s reading. Six days before this morning, Peter declared Jesus the Messiah and Jesus told the disciples that “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”ⁱⁱ Don’t miss that Jesus tells those listening that they will taste death and not simply die. The idea of tasting death is the idea of suffering and martyrdom. Jesus’ words are not words of comfort. They point to suffering. Yet, before that suffering comes, there will be the blessing of seeing the kingdom of God in power.

Mark begins today’s scripture with the words, “six days later.” For Mark to identify time in his Gospel is unusual, and this time stamp acts as a flag we should see and then seek to identify what he is pointing us to. If we think back in biblical time, we will come to another time in the history of God’s people when there is a six-day waiting period before a trip up a mountain, at Mount Sinai when God comes to the mountain top. Prior to that event, Moses and the elders wait six days before Moses goes up the mountain to God. That mountain top visit with God is a defining moment for God’s people, and when Moses comes back from the mountain top with a shining face and commandments from God, he will go forth as their leader, as their king figure on earth, to lead them through their wilderness journey with God to the Promised Land.

Jesus takes with him three disciples, Peter, James, and John, men who have and will witness much of Jesus’ ministry from the healing of Jairus’ daughter to the time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. These three are witnesses to many of the key ministry moments of Jesus. On this day these three climb the mountain with Jesus. Jesus is leading them and somewhere on their climb, it happens. Jesus is transfigured before them. His clothes become dazzling white,

white beyond what we can make them. And as we ponder this sudden dramatic change, we should look forward to the white-robed host in heaven who surround the throne of God from every tribe, tongue, and nation. We should catch a connection in the dazzling white clothes of Jesus to the eternal picture we have been given in the book of Revelation. Here on the mountain top we find a glimpse of things to come. And with Jesus' transfiguration, we also have the arrival of Elijah and Moses. In the midst of all of these sights, Peter speaks up, asking Jesus the rabbi if they should make three booths: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Peter and the other two disciples are terrified with a terror that we can begin to understand if we think for a moment what our own response might be if we were to have witnessed such a transformation of Jesus and the arrival of great men of God. Peter seems to have forgotten Jesus as Messiah and remembered him as a teacher for the moment, trying to make him a co-equal with Moses and Elijah. And before Peter gets a response from Jesus, a cloud overshadows them and we hear a voice correct Peter, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And when the voice has spoken, the disciples look around and see that only Jesus remains with them. The disciples have seen a glimpse of Jesus as something different, something they lack words to describe. Jesus will caution the disciples to speak to no others about what they have seen until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Yes, we have been here before, but this time, we see Jesus go down the mountain with the disciples. As Moses came down the mountain to lead Israel to the Promised Land, Jesus goes down the mountain to lead all people into the kingdom of God through the suffering of the cross. Moses and Elijah are gone after the voice speaks, but Jesus remains to do the will of the Father, to go down from the mountain top where a glimpse of his glory has shown forth and, instead, to set his eyes on the suffering of the cross that will bring about his glory. Peter, James, and John have seen a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, a taste of things to come that will sustain them as they too submit to the will of the one who sent them and seek to complete his works. Jesus, unlike Moses, comes down from the mountain with God to complete the suffering needed to reconcile all people to God. Moses was treated as a king when he came down from the mountain with the shining face he had from being in God's presence that faded over time, but Jesus' glory is completed through the cross and his glory shines for all eternity.

We might notice that most of what happens on the mountain is visual. We see Jesus; we see Jesus transfigured before the disciples; we see his clothes become dazzling white or, as

Augustine describes this moment, “What this sun is to the eyes of the flesh, that is the Lord to the eyes of the heart.”ⁱⁱⁱ Notice that the command from God that comes as the voice on the mountain is not to look at Jesus, but to “listen to him.” So, how do we come to this moment on the mountain and go forth to listen to Jesus? A couple of weeks ago as I sat with one of the younger students at Good News Club and the topic was listening to Jesus, she asked me a question. She said, “I don’t hear Jesus speak like I hear other people speak. How do we hear Jesus speak?” Her question is a really great question. How do we now listen to Jesus? How do we hear what he is saying and obey? How do we hear Jesus speak to us? Are others around us in our fellowship hearing Jesus speak and we are not? I also noticed that this past week one of the topics of the Seedbed Wake-Up Call that Anna Grace Legband shared was about hearing God, or Jesus, speaking to us.

So, I paid attention to all of these voices speaking into my life this week, and thought I would touch on the idea of hearing Jesus, as we are to be those who are seeking to listen to him. This is a command God gave to Jesus’ disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. It was not a suggestion; it was a command. So, let me share a little about how we hear Jesus speak to us. I would like to start by sharing a quote from Soren Kierkegaard, a famous theologian, who wrote, “A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer was listening.”^{iv} We can catch from Kierkegaard the idea that listening to Jesus is connected to prayer. While God can speak directly to us, most of us will never experience in our lives the type of Damascus Road encounter with Jesus that Paul experienced, or if we do, it may be a singular event. However, we are to listen to Jesus, so let me expand the idea of listening to God in prayer as five ways we can hear God. The first is through the words in our Bibles. The second is through dreams and visions. The third is in counsel and common sense. The fourth is personal reflection. And the fifth is hearing God in action. Now, none of these is self-explanatory but there is not time to cover them all in depth, so for those who want to learn more, I will point us toward two great resources. The first is a book by Dallas Willard titled, “Hearing God,” and the second is a book by Pete Greig titled, “How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People.”

Let me start this discussion by pointing out that the Bible is our primary source of revelation and is the authority by which we sift and seek to understand what we hear as we listen to Jesus. If what we think we are hearing from Jesus is not consistent with what we find in

scripture, we need to give great scrutiny to what we are hearing. The light of scripture guided by Holy Spirit is to be our movement to truth, so we need to pay great attention to how what we think we are hearing does or doesn't align with what we find in scripture. When we are seeking to learn about God, we study God's word. We read to learn and we come together with others who are also studying the scriptures so that we might share what we are learning and build up and be built up by the insights we are receiving as we study. Listening to God through the Bible is different. Listening to God through our Bibles requires prayerful meditation. During much of my Christian life, I have heard people speak about this idea of praying the scriptures. Those who have stated this seemed to think that I understood what they mean by this, and it was not until I read Pete Greig's book that I began to understand how to approach hearing God from the Bible. I have always read to learn about God or Jesus or what Paul might be sharing that would help me in my Christian walk. But to obey this command from God of listening to Jesus, I have always struggled. Let me share some of what Pete teaches. As we seek to pray the scriptures, we want to come to them differently. We come to them ready to meditate on the words we find. We begin by reading the words slowly, out loud, and in a manner that allows us to linger over the words we are reading. This approach is like enjoying a great meal or drink. We savor what we are reading and hearing, and we pay attention to where a particular word or phrase catches our attention. We want to linger on that word or phrase, allowing our mind to go down rabbit holes that come into our thoughts. Think of the text as a great work of art that we are trying to enjoy. We can also think of this type of prayer as a search in the word for clues and messages that are for us. Let everything that seeks to pull us away or distract us from the text become a prayer: "Lord, the dryer just went off and I heard that alarm. How can the dry clothes lead me to hear you?" as example. We should begin to discover that on every page, there are opportunities for us to pray the scriptures even if our prayer is "Lord, I do not understand what you are saying here. Can you guide me?" As we pray the scriptures, we should notice that our priorities shift away from our priorities and move into topics we don't normally lift to Jesus in prayer. We are letting Holy Spirit guide our time of prayer with God's word. Listen to where we are led and pray into those topics that come to our mind. Listen to what we are learning as we engage God's word meditatively. As we identify words and ideas, bring them before God in prayer and ask for guidance into what they mean for us this day.

Before we leave learning to listen to God this morning, let me touch briefly on one of the other ways we hear from God. We hear from God in action in the midst of our minds as they are focused elsewhere. We often hear God speak into our minds His response to our prayers. We will sometimes find a gentle touch, impression, or whisper from God that is the answer to our prayer questions as we pray the scriptures, but more often, we may find God speaks to us in the times when our minds are distracted by action. Often, we hear God as we engage in less spiritual actions that don't fully occupy our minds, such as walking, vacuuming the floor, or other actions that require us to use our hands repetitively but don't fully engage our minds. Think of Paul and his tentmaking work as an example. Tentmaking was a means of provision for Paul, but it also is an example of time when Paul may have heard God speak in the midst of his sewing of material. And I suspect that gardening, sewing, weaving, and other hand activities fall into this list of actions where our minds are open to hearing Jesus speak to us. So, after a time of meditative prayer, engage in actions where there is space for Jesus to speak to us and answer the questions we have prayed about as we prayed the scriptures. Keep in mind that in the biblical context, listening to God means "yielding willingly to whatever God tells us to do."^v When we listen to Jesus, what we may hear may only be the first step in the answer Jesus is sending, and it is not until we take that first step that we hear what the next step might be in Jesus' guidance.

As we move into the season of Lent this week with Ash Wednesday marking the beginning of that season, let me encourage all of us not only to open our Bibles and learn about Jesus, but to seek to obey God's command given on the Mount of Transfiguration and open our Bibles and begin to pray the scriptures and seek to be those who are listening to Jesus.

Pray with me: Jesus, we thank you for the glimpse of your glory we have again witnessed through your word. Jesus, help us not only to carry that glimpse of your glory but help us to become your disciples who will pray the scriptures and listen to your voice. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Go forth as those who no longer have the bridegroom with them
and now pray and fast to receive the food we know nothing about.
Go forth to do the will of the one who sends us and to complete his work. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Mark 9:7

ⁱⁱ NRSV Mark 9:1 Kindle edition

ⁱⁱⁱ Oden, Thomas C.; Hall, Christopher A.. Mark (The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Book 103) (p. 111). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Greig, Pete. How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People (p. 151). The Navigators. Kindle Edition.

^v Greig, Pete. How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People (p. 164). The Navigators. Kindle Edition.